



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20460

APR 06 2006

OFFICE OF CONGRESSIONAL AND
INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS

The Honorable Tom Coburn
Chairman
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government
Information, and International Security
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

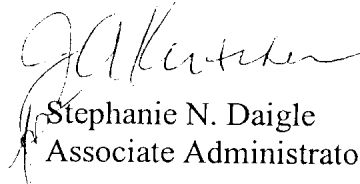
Enclosed, for insertion into the hearing record, are the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) partial responses to follow-up questions from the February 7, 2006 hearing on "Federal Agencies and Conference Spending" before the Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information, and International Security. I hope this information will be useful to you and Members of the Committee.

We share your concern that expenses for these activities be handled in a responsible, effective manner, and are currently engaged in collecting the requested data. In addition, we continue to examine our meeting, training, and work processes to identify efficiencies that can reduce overall management costs without compromising the delivery of our programs.

The enclosed responses pertain to questions that did not require a new data collection effort and which could be addressed with available information. Responses to questions relating to the Agency's historical spending levels will be forwarded as soon as the data is collected.

Thank you for providing EPA the opportunity to testify on this important issue. If you have any questions, please contact me or your staff may contact Reynold Meni in EPA's Office of Congressional and Intergovernmental Relations at 202-564-3669.

Sincerely,



Stephanie N. Daigle
Associate Administrator

Enclosure

QUESTION 7: Have you considered reimbursing employees for incidentals instead of issuing per diems as a way to cut costs? Per diems allow staff to actually make money from official travel.

- a. When issuing per diems does anyone consider that a majority of the meals are included in the conference fees?

ANSWER: In all matters related to travel reimbursement, we comply with the Federal Travel Regulations that apply across government. These regulations require agencies to adjust the rate for Meals & Incidental Expenses when an employee participates in a program for which meals are furnished by the Government or are included in the registration fee. In cases like this, the rate paid to the employee is reduced proportionately for each meal supplied, according to a scale set by GSA. For example, if a conference registration fee covered all three main daily meals, participants would receive no reimbursement for meal expenses. If only dinner were provided as part of the conference, participants would receive a reduced amount to cover breakfast and lunch only.

QUESTION 8: In 2004, EPA sent 50 or more employees to at least 16 conferences. This year would you consider teleconferencing, or some type of “E-conferencing,” as a way to cut travel costs, and maybe send less than ten people instead of 50?

ANSWER: Certain regular interactions such as the Administrator’s senior meetings with Agency executives across the country rely on teleconferencing and videoconferencing capabilities. It is extremely useful to be able to bring EPA people together electronically for a few hours to focus on a particular issue, and we employ this technology regularly.

At the same time, additional analysis of our conference spending practices could help identify greater efficiencies. By focusing on the results we hope to achieve from some of our conferences, we might also identify alternative ways to deliver the same or better results while spending less. Teleconferencing and other electronic means of information sharing offer some opportunities, and we would be interested in exploring others.

QUESTION 9: From 2000-2004 your conference spending jumped 107 percent. Last year, you spent less on conferences, bringing that number down several million dollars. Did spending less on conferences in 2005 compromise your mission or effectiveness in any way?

ANSWER: The lower figure we reported for FY 2005 reflects, in part, the scheduling for one of our largest conferences, the annual National Brownfields Conference. This conference normally takes place in the fall, and the past three conferences have fallen on different sides of the fiscal year dividing line of September 30/October 1. Total conference spending for FY 2004 was somewhat inflated because the 2003 and 2004 Brownfields conferences both took place in that fiscal year: one in October 2003, and one in September 2004. Total conference spending for FY 2005 was slightly lower in part because the 2005 Brownfields conference took place in November 2005 (FY 2006).

We have not seen any change in program effectiveness or mission achievement related to these changes in spending.

QUESTION 10: Of the 400 reported conferences in 2004, 162 emphasized technical training and technology exchange, and 29 sought to gather input and information from participants. Can info exchange and input gathering be achieved through “E-conferencing,” conference calls, and email?

ANSWER: We concur with your suggestion that information can be productively exchanged and gathered by electronic means. In fact, we used teleconferencing to begin gathering information in response to both of your requests for conference spending information.

We have also become more adept at sharing documents for public comment via the Agency website. One current example is the draft of EPA’s proposed set of strategic goals and objectives for the revision to our Strategic Plan for 2006-2011. We posted this document to our website in February, with links to a separate page for sending comments by March 31. This practice helps keep us in compliance with the Congressional mandate in the Government Performance and Results Act, which requires agencies, when developing strategic plans, to “solicit and consider the views and suggestions of those entities potentially affected by or interested in such a plan.”

At the same time, we recognize that all of EPA’s public interactions cannot be managed electronically. Despite the spread of computer access and other electronic channels of communications, we know that all communities and organizations do not have the same capabilities. We hesitate to rely on new technology when doing so would have the unintended consequence of limiting participation. In many cases, direct personal interaction with members of a community is essential. Public meetings are an important part, for example, of community relations in the Superfund program, when environmental protection is a deeply personal issue. EPA has a duty to inform communities about environmental hazards in their areas, and what EPA is doing about them, just as communities have a right to express their concerns to EPA. Technology continues to expand rapidly, however, in both range and flexibility. As EPA’s partners and stakeholders move to more advanced capabilities, we are sure to see more use of telecommunications than we have in the past.